

## JULIAN HAWTHORNE

(1846–1934)

### *Absolute Evil*

#### I

I WAS half-way between twenty and thirty when I joined the Pleasances' house-boat party on their adventure to Thirteen-Mile Beach. Nobody—no society women, at any rate—had been there before, and we called ourselves pioneers.

What made it our objective was the tale of its being haunted. Haunted houses were a fashionable subject of polite investigation at that period; and to test out a haunted island was an enterprise even more engaging.

Our route lay along that chain of sounds or inland seas which extend from Chesapeake to below Hatteras. The island was one of those long, narrow sand-bars that form outlying buttresses against Atlantic storms. That, apart from legend, was all that any of us knew about it at starting. And even legend did not inform us by whom it was haunted, or why.

Two years after our expedition I was led by circumstances, chiefly subjective, to repeat the trip; this time alone. It is of this last occasion that I am to tell you; but first I must say a little more about our pioneering.

#### II

The house-boat belonged to the Pleasances, very nice, middle-aged Philadelphia people, of Quaker stock, but reconciled to the world, while still retaining between each other their thee-and-thy locution. They were rich, of course, and childless; but they brought along their ward, Ann Marlowe, a pretty girl of demure bearing, but with fire in her eye.

To amuse her came Jack Peters, a gilded youth of that epoch, with many suits of wonderful clothes, including two yachting-suits, in anticipation of maritime vicissitudes.

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Of somewhat older years than Jack was Topham Brent, an old friend of my own, already a distinguished surgeon. Topham ought not to have come, for I had refused his offer of marriage not long before; but he was of the persistent sort, and, I admit, the finest sort of fellow.

Then there was the Rev. Nathaniel Tyler, a young New England divine, high-bred and learned, with a fine pulpit reputation, but suffering from nervous breakdown, owing to too assiduous study, no doubt. This did not prevent him from being very seriously interested in me, and we spent much of our time in intimate conversations about original sin and esoteric philosophy, with sentiment never far off; while Topham rambled about the craft, smoking cigars and trying to look indifferent.

Finally, there was myself, Martha Klemm, a handsome spinster, of the Beacon Street, Boston, brand. After this rather long interval I am a spinster still.

The house-boat was sixty or seventy feet long and more than half as wide, luxuriously decorated and furnished, with a chef and two other servants, and an inexhaustible supply of good things to eat and drink. Philadelphia Quakers know how to live.

### III

I was interested in original sin, and had dabbled in esoteric philosophy; my remote ancestors had been Salem witches. So, on these grounds at least, I was ready to meet Nat Tyler half-way.

He was magnetic, fine-looking, and anything but a fool. He was tall, spare, dark-browed, with deep-set, gray eyes rather near together. His long hands were very sensitive and expressive. His lips were thin, but sharply curved, implying eloquence and secret voluptuousness. There was a conspicuous black mole on his left cheek, close to the furrow that went from the arched nostril to the corner of the mouth. His voice was a deep barytone, agreeably modulated, with reserves of power. I had heard him preach, and he could send forth notes like an organ.

Every once in a while something peeped forth from the shadows of those eyes of his that made me jump—interiorly, of

course; I was woman of the world enough to betray nothing. It was as if somebody I knew very well had suddenly peeped out at me from a window in a strange place, where that face was the last I should have expected to see.

It seemed to have nothing to do with the personality of Nat Tyler himself; he was a clergyman, and this was suggestive of anything but divinity. It conveyed a profound, fascinating wickedness. It was as old as the pyramids, yet riotous with vitality. Perhaps I ought not to speak in this way of a thing which belonged to imagination; this reverend young gentleman's life had always been open as daylight, and more than blameless—apostolic. His family was as old-established as my own, and I had known of him long, though our first personal meeting was recent.

Nothing diabolic, therefore, could justly be inferred from what I have mentioned. Call it just a grotesque notion of mine. I'm sure nobody but I had noticed it, not even Topham Brent, who might have been not unwilling to detect anything objectionable in my reverend crony.

Topham was not so wise then as he is now, and may not have known that women are often attracted by what ought to repel them—some women! I confess I was on the lookout for that satanic drama in Tyler's eyes, and enjoyed the little fillip it gave me. By no word or gesture did Tyler himself betray consciousness of his peculiarity.

We discovered that we both had queer books—antique lore about witchcraft and the like. This gave us common ground, and, what was more to the point, uncommon, too.

Imagine us side by side in our reclining chairs on a moonlight evening, with the calm, watery expanse far and near, and a dark line of low shore on the horizon. Yonder the red, reflected light of a fisherman's dory; around one corner of the deck-house the giggle and babble of Jack Peters entertaining Ann, and her brief rejoinders; round the other occasional smoke-drifts from the excellent cigar Topham was smoking; inside the house was the placid silence of the benign old Pleasances reading magazines to themselves.

Tyler, in his agreeable murmur, is speculating in my ear on the origin of evil.

“Thomas Aquinas says that angels, white and black, can

change men into beasts permanently; enchanters could do it, too, but not for long. Seventeenth century witchcraft affirmed that certain natural objects and rites could produce strange effects without aid of God or devil. But the operator must renounce God and Christ, be re-baptised, trample on the cross, and be marked in a certain way—a symbolic transaction. The person could then do only evil—good was forbidden to him, or her!”

“Do you believe people can be changed into beasts?” I inquired, as if we were talking of the weather to-morrow.

“Spiritually, I know they can be, and we often notice the resemblance of some one to an animal. Well, if, as the poet Spencer says, ‘Soul is form and doth the body make,’ why mightn’t the body of a man with the soul of a hog assume, under favorable conditions, hoggish lineaments?”

“I wonder. But what are the favorable conditions?”

“His own persistent will, or dominating suggestion from another.”

Here there was the creaking of a chair and Jack came grinning round the corner.

“Say, parson, here’s Ann says there are ghosts, and I’ll leave it to you; are there?”

Ann, with her inscrutable smile, appeared in the background.

“Ghosts, yes; but can we see them?” returned Tyler. “Ask Dr. Brent?”

“How about it, doc?” Jack called out.

“We’re on our way to Thirteen-Mile Beach to find out,” answered Topham’s voice, with a whiff of cigar-smoke.

“I’ll bet a dozen pairs of gloves to a cigarette we don’t see one.”

Mr. Pleasance put his head out of the window.

“Quarter of twelve, folks; wife and I are going to bed.”

“Run along, Mr. Peters,” said Ann.

The currents were mixed, and we all stood up. Tyler and I, however, found ourselves leaning over the taffrail at the front of our old vehicle, as it slowly pushed its way through the liquid wilderness. The moonlight fell upon his aquiline features, as he faced toward me, and I involuntarily watched for Satan.

“I wish we could have met sooner,” he remarked. “I have

longed for stimulus and companionship in my researches; such things are perilous when one goes alone. The absolute evil!—is there such a thing? Until we know, how can we understand and combat it?”

“The difficulty seems to be,” I said, “that those who know it don’t care to combat it. We’ll assume, for the sake of argument, that witches really existed, as well as ghosts. But, for my part, I don’t feel sure that we ought to combat it—that is, if we felt any assurance of extirpating it. Evil is as necessary an ingredient of life as red pepper is of an epicure’s menu—it stimulates one to enjoy the banquet of life.”

Out peeped Beelzebub for a moment. “You are incomparable!” murmured the parson.

“It’s a fine night for a broomstick ride,” I said; “but we’d better go in.”

“‘The bridal of the earth and sky!’” he quoted, from Herbert, I think, looking round admiringly on the tranquil prospect. When he turned back the devil had vanished, and we went inside like two Christians.

#### IV

No place to compare with a house-boat for being bored, or for a flirtation, has been invented; and when the youth of one flirtation is complicated by the animated corpse of a former one, the resources of the situation might keep anyone awake. But I shall not adduce further illustrations; and I am free to confess that although I afforded my reverend friend adequate opportunities, he did not come to a technical issue. Something kept him back at the critical juncture; whether it was Satan, or whether Satan lacked power to bring on the avowal, I won’t decide.

Or maybe that the fatuity of poor Jack being slowly eviscerated by that demure little devil of an Ann Marlowe deterred me from putting forth all my spells; or, possibly, it may have been a stroke of altruistic conscience about Topham Brent, who vainly and intemperately sought an anodyne in tobacco.

Howbeit, neither Ann nor I was engaged when we arrived at Thirteen-Mile Beach and set forth in quest of the ghost.

All we found there was endless prolongation of sand, with a

low backbone of tussocks tufted with beach-grass, and a few groups of storm-stunted cedars. Nothing seemed farther from any taint of the supernatural as we four young people tramped hither and yon, and the Pleasance pair sat in their beach-chairs and contemplated the incoming or withdrawing tides.

The place was not wholly destitute of incarnate human beings, however. I must give a word to the Duckworths.

What a spot for a man to bring his bride to! Old Tom Duckworth had been a sailor originally, and after giving up the Seven Seas had become a sort of beach-comber. He had put together a hut on the highest part of the beach, at its hither end; had fished the Sound and the ocean, and had salvaged flotsam and jetsam from wrecks, of which there was always a tolerable supply after a gale. He had a little garden, and kept goats, pigs, and poultry. And there he dwelt in a solitude more unmitigated than Alexander Selkirk's.

One or twice a year, though, he rowed across the ten miles of Sound, and made his way to a neighboring town for provisions.

And it chanced, on an excursion of this kind, that he encountered an elderly female.

Jane—I never learned her maiden name—had been a school-teacher in the vicinity for half a lifetime, but had been recently retired by the school board in favor of some younger and postdiluvian rival. She was thrown upon her own resources, which was exactly nothing, for either from inability or from moral principle she had contracted no debts.

Tom proposed marriage, she accepted him; and here they were, and for the past ten years had been, contented with their environment and each other.

Tom had added to his mansion (made of old ships' timbers) two more rooms, and a fence circumventing the building, five feet high, and sunk at least as far into the sand, as a protection against storm-tides. The enclosure was about forty feet square; the pigs had their sty, and the goats and the hens wandered at will.

I once spent a summer at Étretat, on the Normandy coast, where the old sailors' huts are made of overturned boats with windows cut in the sides, a flue sticking up at one end, and a hole at the other by way of a door. They have been painted by

a thousand artists, but were less picturesque than Tom Duckworth's contrivance. Within, the rooms were kept rigorously neat by Jane, and she did much useful domestic knitting in addition to her other household duties.

They were a healthy, wholesome old couple, and may have been more than a hundred and twenty years old, combined. They had no children, and both seemed to be sorry for it.

After a first shyness they allowed us to become well acquainted with them. You might think there wasn't much of them or theirs for us to get acquainted with; but the natures of solitary people are apt to have more unmapped country in them than worldly folk imagine. They see and think and do things peculiar to themselves, and one may turn up buried treasure in them at any moment.

Our house-boat was moored off their garden for three days while we explored the island. Sea, sand, and sky—that was all, a portentous, desolate monotony. But I began to feel the spell of it, and so, I think, did Tyler.

On our last day he and I, both good walkers, tramped to the other end of the island and back, a long twenty-five miles. We had gone pretty deep into each other's minds before we returned; but, as I said, nothing ever took place. Our only substantial discovery was another hut, or shack, perched on a hummock in a kind of marsh near the southern extremity of the beach. It was uninhabited.

Tyler observed: "What a chance for a hermit!"

The Duckworths told us on our return that legend said it had been occupied many years before by a fugitive negro murderer, and was supposed to be haunted. So here was what we had come for, after all!

But the dear old Pleasances wanted to be heading for Philadelphia, and it was agreed that Jack had won his cigarettes by default. A twenty-five-mile journey and a night in the shack was voted to be too high a price to pay to decide the problem of the supernatural. We left the ghost on the fence.

At Beaufort, on our way back, we met our forwarded mail, and Tyler, after reading his, said he would have to leave us there and get home by rail.

"I hope, Martha," he said, as he held my hand at parting—

we had got as far as first names—"that we may soon meet again, and arrive at more definite conclusions."

"As to the origin of evil?" I inquired with simplicity.

I felt his eyes for a moment, but I happened to be facing the sun, and could not be sure whether or not that interesting hobby of his made its appearance.

"So far as I am concerned," he replied after a little, "intimacy with you could be only a source of good."

It was a clever turn, and now I saw that his glance was as innocent as a child's. Topham, with his broad shoulders and square face, was puffing his cigar near by, leaning back against the rail and looking quite happy. He was to stick to the ship until the last. Jack, who was dejected, suddenly resolved to accompany Tyler, and his two big trunks and four suit-cases went over the side, Ann Marlowe looking serenely on. She afterwards married Philip Bramwell, a banker of fifty.

Between Topham and me during the rest of the voyage, nothing important transpired. In Boston I learned that the Rev. Nathaniel Tyler had resigned his pastorate, and would spend some years in Europe, especially Palestine.

I had meditations over that news, but could make nothing of it. I dreamed of him several times, vividly, a most unusual thing for me. In these dreams we were always traveling somewhere at great speed, I reluctantly, he with eagerness. We never arrived.

I will end this prologue, as I might term it, here. After two years I went back to Thirteen-Mile Beach, alone, and making no one privy to my destination.

## V

Not only did I tell no one, not even Topham, where I was going, but I could not myself reasonably account for my escapade. If you are indulging the notion that some hypnotic influence was involved, dismiss it immediately.

I have said that I am a descendant of witches. My exterior motive was an intense craving for solitude. Many good-looking and affluent young women in society might feel the same, after too much social dissipation. I thought of that

endless, desolate beach with a longing which at last became irresistible.

It did not occur to me that absence of human companionship does not assure solitude. It may, on the contrary, plunge one into an environment compared with which New York or London would appear deserts. For we take memory and imagination with us. The seabirds that scream overhead or waddle along the margins of the surf; the grotesque forms of twisted cedars; the rustle of sea-grass in the wind; the interminable percussion of the breakers; the dead infinity of the sand itself—there can be no solitude, in the sense of freedom from disturbances of thought, in the presence of such things. They draw us back into the maelstrom.

I meant to spend a month on Thirteen-Mile Beach, and sent a message to the Duckworths asking shelter with them, and naming the date of my arrival. Should they refuse it—which I was confident they would not—I was prepared to camp out on the sands; the weather was warm and I was hardy.

I remitted money to cover extra expenses for board and lodging. I took with me a trunk full of necessities, my bicycle (a chainless one), and a revolver; not for self-defense, but I am a good shot, and might amuse myself by practising at the gulls.

After leaving the train I had to drive forty miles in an open wagon over the preposterous roads; and then, not finding Duckworth as I had expected, was obliged to hunt up a local clam-digger and get him to row me across. He explained Duckworth's failure to appear; the poor fellow had been drowned in a great storm that winter. But Jane, he said, was still there, and he believed there was "a little gal" with her.

It was near sunset when the dory stuck its nose in the mud at the end of the Duckworths' thin-legged little pier. Jane was waiting there; she had seen our approach from afar. She greeted me with a sober countenance and words, but the grip of her lean old hand was expressive of a dreary kind of satisfaction. I asked if the young woman could help us up with the trunk. She stared; young woman?

Just then the gate of the fence was pushed open, and a child of four came trudging down the path. I understood.

My clam-digger got his bony back under the trunk and

plodded up with it. Jane had made ready my room for me; she gave the clam-digger a slice of pork and some baked beans as refreshment after his trip. I glanced at myself in the crooked bit of looking-glass and shook down my hair and combed it out, and changed my traveling-dress for a jersey and a pair of loose knee-breeches, which was to be my costume in this retirement, and then came into the combination kitchen and sitting-room to drink a dish of tea, as Jane called it.

The little gal stood between my knees all the while and stared up in my face. She had taken to me at first sight, and was interested in my black stream of hair. When I asked her name she puffed out her mouth and said something like "Puhd!" Jane explained:

"I named her Perdita; she was lost, you see, and my Tom, he was lost getting her ashore."

The child was sturdy, and had thick, yellow hair, cut square off at the back, like a fourteenth century page's.

My room being on the side of the sea, I had already seen through the window the ribs of the wrecked vessel—a schooner—sticking up outside the breakers and deeply embedded in the sand. Jane told me the story, not consecutively, but a little now and then, day after day. The gale—"Tom called it a hurricane, and I reckon he knew"—had blown two days, and the evening of the third was approaching when the vessel was sighted, driving straight on the beach, only the stumps of the masts left, and nobody, as it turned out, on board.

When she struck, the wind stopped, as if it had done its job and quit. The surf was too high to go out to her, however; the clouds broke away overhead, and the full moon shone down, it being then midnight.

As the two old people stood watching, Jane had fancied she heard a sound of crying from the wreck—the crying of a child. Tom had finally agreed he heard something, too, in the intervals of the breakers. He got out his old binoculars, but could make out nothing on the deck; but the name of the vessel, painted in white letters on her bows, was discernible—"Jane—New Orleans."

"Tom looks at me," said the old woman, "and says he: 'Jane—and a child crying! Looks like the Lord sent us a baby, after all!' And when that idee struck him, Miss Klemm, there was

nothing could hold him. 'Tide's goin' out,' says he, 'and sea calmin' down; I got to get that kid!'"

The stout old mariner brought out the life-belt and line, hitched one end of the line to the post and went in. Jane stood by the post and watched. Tom passed the breakers safely and struck out for the ship. He would disappear in the trough of the seas and then reappear when she thought him lost.

But as he approached the side of the vessel, which lay broad-side-on, a big comber lapped over her from seaward and came on, bearing something with it from the deck. It was an impromptu raft, made of heavy timbers, and the child had been made fast to it. A corner of the structure, carried on the crest of the wave, was dashed against Tom Duckworth's head. Jane ran down into the froth of the breakers and received the raft, with the little child upon it, still living, and her husband's dead body.

I suppose such things are not uncommon on this treacherous coast. But what a simple, appalling drama! There was nothing dramatic in Jane's temperament, and no gift of expression but might have been beggared in portraying such a catastrophe. She told me the thing without emphasis or gesture—doing her knitting or stirring the contents of the saucepan on the kitchen stove. There had been no one present to sympathize with her agony—only the thunder of the waves upon the sand, the screaming sea-gulls, the moon staring down from the cloud-rifts.

She drew the body up beyond the reach of the waves, and took the child into the cabin, fed it, and warmed it. The next day men came over from the mainland.

"It wasn't any use hating the child; it wasn't to blame, so I got fond of it," she remarked. The Lord had sent it to her, a substitute for what He had taken away! That was her interpretation. Perdita was not a marvel of beauty, but she was an active, smiling, affectionate little thing, and kept Jane busy looking after her.

"She keeps the loneliness off," Jane observed.

## VI

I took up my regimen of life immediately. The sand was hard and elastic, just the consistency for bicycle-riding. It was Sep-

tember, and warm for the season. I had the freedom of the island—nobody ever visited it. I would ride out before breakfast eight or ten miles down the beach, and then take a surf bath, unimpeded by a bathing-dress. Coming out I would get on my wheel again and enjoy a wild witch-ride to and fro till my skin was dry and glowing.

What a tonic for body and mind! No born savage could have had a tithe my delight in it. The sun, the sea, the sand, the gulls were my sole playmates. I would throw a long wreath of kelp over my shoulder and speed till it flew out behind me, mingling with the fluttering flag of my hair. Nature seems to welcome defiance of conventions, and to say, with a smile, ‘So, the truant has come back again!’”

How men and women interfere with and imprison one another!

After breakfast and washing up the things, in which I collaborated with Jane, though she didn’t wish it, I would go out and sprawl in the sun and play with Perdita and feed the pigs and chickens and have fun with the goat. An hour or two of this and then, with a little bundle of lunch at my belt, I would jump on the wheel again and be off till late afternoon. Dismounting, I would make ready for another bath of sun and air, if not of sea, and seldom resumed my riding-dress till it was time to go home.

It was not many days before I might have been taken for a wild Indian: I was golden brown from head to feet.

Why not live this way always? The thought of going back to Boston was intolerable! Nature and I were one thing.

One evening, after Perdita had been got to her crib and was asleep, and Jane and I were sitting beside the driftwood fire, and all was still except the deep, soft rhythm of the surf, a strange, remote sound came vibrating to my ears. Jane gave a slight movement, but did not look up from her knitting. The sound came again.

“Are there dogs on the island?” I asked.

“Best not notice it, Miss Klemm,” said Jane; she seemed embarrassed. “Gulls, maybe.”

This evasion roused my curiosity. No sea-bird could emit a call like that. It had reminded me of the coyotes, as I had heard them on the western deserts at night; but, of course, it

couldn't be that! It must be a dog, running wild. But how had a dog got over here? Some man must have brought it; but the idea of a man coming to the island was disquieting. It would be an invasion of my liberties!

The sound came once more—now further off.

“Just not mind it—that’s my plan,” repeated Jane. “My mother, she was born in Ireland, and used to tell us about the banshee. I reckon this is something in that way. Nothing there—only the sound. I heard it first after Tom died!”

“Never before that?”

“No, miss; and if you’re agreeable I’d sooner not talk of it. Things like that comes oftener if you worry about ’em.”

“I thought you had more sense, Jane!” I said. “I know all about banshees; but we’re not children—we’re two women out here alone. A wild dog like that might kill one of your pigs or chickens. Besides, where there’s a dog a man is apt to be not far off. The creature ought to be hunted down and killed, and I’ll do it to-morrow!” I added, remembering my revolver at the bottom of my trunk. “Its howling is disagreeable, and its being here interferes with my privacy.”

Jane heaved a sigh, and went on with her knitting in silence; and there was no further disturbance that night. Next morning there was a northerly wind, with gusts of rain, and I omitted my early ride. But going out, during an intermission of the showers, I met Perdita at the seaward gate of the palisade, crying lustily.

In explanation she pointed over to Tom Duckworth’s grave, which had been made about thirty yards south of the enclosure; it was surrounded with a little picket, and Jane had planted flowers on it.

But mischief had been at work there the night before. The flowers had been violently dug up and scattered about, and a hole of some depth hollowed out, as if to get at what lay beneath. There were no marks of spade or pickax, but there were other traces that left no doubt as to the perpetrator—it was the howling beast of the foregoing evening. Perdita, going out to pluck a flower and finding the destruction, had been smitten with indignation and grief.

I would have kept knowledge of it from Jane, but the child’s

lamentations had drawn her out of the kitchen—she came, wiping her hands on her apron, and beheld the desecration. She stood rigid a minute, her meager old face twisted with horror; then her lips trembled, and she said, “I didn’t know I’d an enemy in the world!”

“Enemy? It’s that damned hound!” I answered in wrath. “Clear your imagination of enemies and banshees, woman. The plundering beast has lived too long.”

But Jane’s reticence being thus broken she became almost voluble, and her supernatural fears came out. The howling, she told me, had begun soon after Tom’s death—it was an evil spirit! The physical attack upon the grave seemed to confirm her in that conviction. Once, she declared, when she had gone out at night to bring in a skirt that had been blown over the fence, and the thing had made a swoop at her through the air! No, not a gull, nor a hawk—no mortal creature went on such wings!

She didn’t know whether the things were the souls of the folks that had been swept off the ship before she struck, and had been carried away in the sea and never had burial; or whether the persecution was aimed at poor Tom for something he might have done when he was a sailor before the mast; or whether it was something about Perdita, who had appeared miraculously, as one might say; or whether, finally, she herself were the person concerned.

In short, to my surprise, the old schoolmistress confessed herself a prey to the rankest superstition, and reason and ridicule were alike wasted on her. The only thing to do was to kill the dog and show her its remains.

The rain-clouds drifted away during the night, and the sun rose clear for a day of perfect beauty and radiance. I awoke betimes and hastened to get abroad, not delaying to delve into my trunk for the revolver; neither concrete dogs nor ghosts were likely to be out so early. I swept down the beach as swiftly as I could drive; reached the point where I was accustomed to take my dip, threw off my clothes and ran in, eager to feel the thrill of the breakers on my body.

I came out breathing hard and tingling with joy of life. I had been carried down some distance by the set of the current; and

as I debouched beyond the reach of the sliding surf I saw something which startled me not a little—a man's bare footprint in the sand!

## VII

Without staying to examine it, I scuttled to my jersey and breeches and huddled them on in a jiffy. Then my panic changed to anger: I regretted not having brought my revolver, and went back to investigate.

There were several of them; they emerged from below the surf line and proceeded diagonally inland till they were lost in the loose, grass-grown sand. The tide was ebbing; they might be two or three hours old. They were long and narrow.

Where was the man?

From the little elevation, where I now stood, the surface of the island was visible for miles in all directions; but no living creature was in sight. My eyes are good, and I could have seen any moving object in that clear atmosphere, with the sun standing an hour high above the sea at a great distance. Of course the fellow might be hiding behind one of the little clumps of cedars that dotted the expanse.

A man and a dog on my island! Howlings by night and footprints in the morning! There were no dog footprints, to be sure, but it was inevitable to associate the evidences to ear and eye. They must have a habitation—where was it?

I recalled, for the first time, the little abandoned shack at the further end of the island, said to have been the refuge of the negro murderer of old times. I had never yet ridden more than ten or twelve miles from the Duckworth cabin. Had the shack a new tenant? If so, he could hardly be a desirable neighbor. Thirteen miles was, indeed, a considerable distance to go and return, for a man, if not for a dog. But, if the man were a "wild man," distance might be no hindrance to him. There had been no indications, however, that he had accompanied his dog on the nocturnal excursions.

I was now much nearer his abode than the Duckworths.

I took another look at the footprints and noticed their great distance apart—more than five feet. Thirty inches is a good average stride for a man, walking on sand. The sixty-inch in-

tervals showed that he must have been running. Perhaps there was nothing singular in that; but it gave me an unpleasant sensation—a naked man running insanelly along the beach! But I laughed at myself—I was giving imagination too much rein. The tracks could not be traced more than thirty or forty yards, and a barefoot man is not necessarily bare all over. Possibly he had been merely taking a bath, like myself, and had run out of the water, as I had, under a natural stimulus.

After all, too, he had as much ostensible right to be on the island as I had.

Nevertheless—and I am sensitive to such impressions—there was an evil “vibration,” as the saying is, from the footprints. And, at any rate, their presence destroyed my freedom. I determined to get my gun and explore. Meanwhile I would say nothing to Jane. She had enough to tax her nerves as it was!

As I rode home my fancy pictured a big, shambling negro, with an ugly dog, roaming about the place; an outlaw, doubtless, subsisting on clams—what else was there for him to eat? He must be ripe for robbery and violence. And to oppose him, two lone women and a child, forty miles from help! I was glad of my revolver.

On my arrival at the cabin I took a look at the place as a post of defense. The palisade completely surrounded it, and was five feet in height; made of massive pieces of ship-timber, planted deep and firm in the sand. This strength had been designed to resist the onset of the waves in case they should come up so far; but, of course, an athletic man could easily vault over it—unless he were shot down in the act!

The cabin itself was also very strongly constructed, as strong as an ordinary blockhouse. I was confident I could defend it against any single assailant, especially were he unarmed, as the negro would most likely be. A surprise assault was the thing to be guarded against. A small dog of our own would have been useful—to give the alarm at night. Perhaps we could procure one.

After breakfast I spent an hour cleaning my revolver and trying my skill at a target. Jane shook her head, probably thinking that bullets were vain against demonic powers. But Perdita was hugely delighted with the shining little instrument, and wanted it for a plaything; women of all ages will play with death! When

I fired it the explosion didn't frighten her; her little heart had never learned to tremble, but she couldn't grasp the connection between the sharp, sudden noise, and the hole in the plank thirty yards distant. I took a shot at a gull on the wing, and by chance cut a piece of a feather from its tail; Perdita shouted with astonishment and delight; it was wondrous magic to her.

About ten o'clock I mounted my wheel again and set off down the beach—the gun in my belt. In the broad sunshine, beside the sparkling sea, I felt secure and adventurous; after all, there was good New England fighting blood in my veins!

It was my purpose to ride to the end of the beach and take a look at the negro's shack. My apprehensions might prove groundless. The owner of the footprints might be a harmless hunter in quest of ducks, or even a wandering tourist on a vacation hike. Old Jane's supernatural gossip had perhaps caused me to take too romantic a view of the situation. I would solve the problem forthwith.

The tide, since my early excursion, had passed its low mark, and was now making again. But when I got to the place where I had bathed the footprints were still uncovered. They were three inches longer than my own beside them. The fellow must be immense!

I rode on slowly, pondering, but, under the genial moisture of exercise on my body, neither uneasy nor as much irritated as before. The Atlantic coast of the United States was long enough to accommodate two persons without crowding. Very likely this was the first, and would be the last time the invader would leave his trail on this part of it!

But a mile or so beyond I halted sharply. The trail again—and something more!

I dismounted. The footsteps, still indicating a running gait, came down toward the sea again; but after going parallel with the surf-line for a little began circling around, as if the crazy negro—such I now imagined him—were in a fit. Some of the prints were deep driven. At first I thought there were two sets of prints. But, no! All were made by the same pair of feet. The circuits they traced were narrow and irregular; the marks often crossed one another—a sort of insane dance.

But there was something else, and it turned me cold when I realized what it meant.

The footprints didn't go on beyond the general circle in any direction! Where, then, was the man—unless a balloon had swooped down and borne him away?

That was one bad thing; the other was quite as bad.

The human footprints were intermingled with others, not human—the marks of the four paws of an enormous dog! But this beast had not entered the circle from any point outside of it—at least, if he had, the man must have carried him in his arms. But this was unthinkable; and if the man had carried him in the beast had left the circle on its own foot, continuing at full speed down the beach, leaving behind it—what? Nothing at all!

I was armed, and am far from being a timorous person. But this weird thing crawled into my nerves with a sensation, compared with which the threat of impending death would have seemed trivial.

A man had entered that circle and had vanished there. A beast had run out of that circle without having entered it.

As I rode slowly homeward, beside the sparkling sea, under the cloudless sky, that was all I could make of it; and I didn't like it.

### VIII

But the creeping paralysis of helpless dismay—helpless against I knew not what—presently changed into a passion of black anger. I would have it out with this thing and be done with it—one way or another. To flinch from it would be to lose nerve and self-respect forever.

At the cabin I was monosyllabic with Jane, and in no mood to respond to Perdita's invitations to play with her, or give her the shining toy to play with. I wanted to take counsel with myself—by myself. I would have dismissed even Topham Brent, though I was used to think of him as a counselor. I would rather have discussed the matter with that very different person, the Rev. Nathaniel Tyler, with whom, as I have said, I had ground in common.

Upon second thought, however, I dismissed him, too; he would be too refined and fastidious to take hold of this brutal event efficiently. I must deal with it alone!

But thinking about it only made it worse. I must act. I must hunt the enigma down, solve it, and destroy it, or be destroyed by it. Still I stayed in my room, unable to decide how to go about the adventure. I sat listening to the surf and to the gulls and to the occasional voices of the child and Jane; once or twice the rap of soft little knuckles came on my door, but I kept silence.

When, later, Jane summoned me to dinner, I declined to come out. I wasn't hungry, I told her; had a headache.

Through my uneasy preoccupation I was sensible by familiar sounds that Perdita was being put to bed. I had usually helped at this ceremony, and the child asked after me. "I want Aunt Martha"—such was my title in her list of friends. Jane and I were the only persons represented there. I had an impulse to go to her, but resisted it. After she had gone to sleep the silence in the cabin was complete; there was only the heavy chanting of the surf coming through my open window.

A couple of hours passed and it was now dark—the moon had not yet risen. Jane's voice at my door; she hoped I was feeling better, she had put a dish of victuals on the stove for me, in case I got an appetite; she was going to bed.

"Good night, Jane; I'll be all right tomorrow!" I said.

Should I too turn in? What was the use of sitting up?

But I was in no condition to sleep, and it was better to be awake standing than lying down. I leaned out of the window and breathed in the soft air from the sea; there was a light breeze from the south. I could see the long, level line of the horizon, and part of the black ribs of the wrecked schooner, thrusting up against the sky.

All at once, between the ribs, appeared a pyramid of bright red light—the gibbous moon rising in the east. A moment after I thought I heard, very far away, a long ululation, which crisped my nerves.

The dog was abroad!

Since childhood I have always been affected by the changes of the moon, sometimes very much so. As the light of the satellite fell on my face my mind cleared, and I knew what was to be done. I had partly undressed; I pulled on my sweater again and buckled on the revolver. I had left my bicycle under

the lean-to outside; to avoid disturbing Jane I slipped out of the window. One of the hens uttered an interrogative croak as I passed the coop.

I got my wheel, opened the gate of the palisade, closed it behind me, and ran the wheel down to the firm sand of the beach, where I mounted; it was just past eleven o'clock. I set off in the old direction, glad to be in action and strung up to meet anything.

The horizon line had been clear a few minutes before; but now I observed a low, gray fog moving in toward the coast, with the mysteriously slow yet swift movement characteristic of sea fogs. It had seemed distant, yet now it had reached out a long, silent arm, and had touched the beach ahead. The moon hung a little way above it. The fog clung close to the surface of the scene—seemed hardly more than a man's height in thickness.

In another minute it had swathed me in its gray impalpability; and at the same time I heard again the howl of the dog, much more distinct than at first. My pedals revolved more swiftly, and the revolver thumped against my hip; I hoped the negro was with his dog. My only fear was lest they should pass me in the obscurity of the flowing mist.

The line of the beach was not straight; there were wide, shallow bays and projections, and the mist confused me, so that occasionally I found myself running close to the surf, or away from it. But the sea was a safeguard against losing my direction entirely, and I kept on at a fast pace. But was that which I sought coming toward me, or fleeing before me? If the latter, my best speed would be needed to catch up with it. I bent over the handlebars; speed in either case!

Three short barks, followed by a long howl, sounded not fifty yards away. In the few seconds that followed I halted, leaped off the wheel, snatched the revolver from my belt, and held it ready in my right hand, standing behind the wheel. I could not risk a shot while mounted; but afoot I was confident of my aim, and could use the saddle as a rest.

Then, at last, the beast disclosed itself. It was alone. Itself gray, it seemed formed out of the fog. The cantering movement was what I first discerned; but when within a dozen

yards it stopped, plunging its forepaws in the sand, its head extended forward.

Shreds of mist drifted past it, and perhaps exaggerated its apparent size, but it seemed much bigger than I had anticipated. And the long, dripping jaws, the short, thick ears, the build of the chest and shoulders, and the shaggy tail flung out behind, showed me at a glance that this was no dog of any breed; it was a wolf!

Unaccountable though its presence in this region might be, there could be no doubt of that. I had to deal with a savage wild beast—a giant of its kind.

For an instant a perplexing thought of its association with a human being, even a crazy negro, flashed across my brain; but the present emergency was enough, and I gripped myself to meet it.

*“The absolute evil—is there such a thing?”* This saying of Tyler’s recurred to my mind as I faced the creature, challenging the glare of its close-set eyes down the barrel of my weapon. The aspect of the monster answered the question. Hell could engender nothing more diabolical than this!

My hand did not tremble as I sighted to a point between the glaring eyes and touched the trigger. The detonation sounded flat in the boundless gray expanse that surrounded us.

The beast gave a lurch of the head, uttered a harsh bark, swung round in its tracks, and was out of sight in a moment. I had missed it clean!

I sent a second bullet after it at hazard. Another long howl was the answer, and already it seemed to be a mile away.

The fog thickened and now obscured the moon. I had sprung to my saddle, but almost immediately gave up the pursuit. There wasn’t a chance in a million that I would set eyes upon the creature again that night.

I turned and rode back, feeling upon the whole glad of the encounter. I had met the thing and knew what it was; and though I had incredibly missed killing it, I had put it to flight, and perhaps driven it off the island entirely.

But there was a feeling in me that I should meet it again. I didn’t believe that an incident so out of the ordinary would have no sequel.

## IX

Time passed on, however, and there was no more baying at the moon or alarms in our household, nor did I find any more tracks on the beach. The weather was the most exhilarating I had ever known, and Diana, the goddess—to whom fanciful admirers had often compared me—couldn't have felt more of the elixir of immortality in her than I did.

The moon, after her brief retirement, appeared once more, a lovely crescent, in the west, and, gradually attaining her full splendor, shone at last transcendent in the pallid sky. I was in the pink of condition, as the young fellows in training for a race say. I had ceased thinking of the wolf, and had never told Jane of my meeting with it. Either she had forgotten her misgivings, or some odd reluctance prevented her mentioning them. Perdita and I had become sworn play-fellows—her innocence and confidence had made me love her.

“Absolute evil” seemed a grotesque hallucination. Absolute good was more real and near.

One thing only marred my tranquillity—though the wolf never occurred to my mind in waking hours, I dreamed of it several times at night. I was alone in some desolate place, deeply preoccupied, and suddenly felt that I had lost my way. Looking up, I saw the wolf before me. Nothing but its head was clearly visible, however. And in this head the terrible, glaring, close-set eyes drew mine irresistibly till, after a moment, the eyes alone seemed there. Behind them spread a region of darkness, out of which the beast had emerged, and into which it seemed striving to entice me, as a snake fascinates a bird.

I struggled against the hideous lure, but felt I was yielding—at which juncture I awoke.

This dream, almost the same in details, visited me three or four times. In sleep only the nature of the sleeper is active; what belongs to acquired character no longer exists. And the nature possesses impulse, but not will. My resistance could never have been overcome in my waking state.

There was one other feature of this experience to which I will merely allude; I didn't understand it at the time. It was the most revolting of all. The eyes of the beast reminded me of eyes

that I had seen before. Not the eyes themselves, either, but the look that came from them. I could not trace this impression back to its source, though that seemed only just beyond my reach. It disturbed me.

But by the time the moon had filled her circle, this obsession, too, left me, and there was no cloud on my sky except regret at my approaching departure from the beach. When I spoke of it to Jane, her face fell.

"I'd be thankful if you'd stay longer, miss," she said. "And the child—what'll *she* do?" She pressed her lips together, as if trying to keep something back; but it came. She bent forward and whispered, "I'm afeared of the dog!"

I laughed with ruddy-cheeked assurance.

"I think the dog, as you call it, won't trouble you again." Then I told her my story. "I fancy I must have wounded it," I said; "it's either dead or gone for good. I've been down and back scores of times since, and seen no trace of it. Put it out of your mind."

I did not tell her of that insoluble enigma of the mingled tracks of the beast and the man. In truth, I preferred to keep away from it. There must have been some error in my observation; impossibilities don't happen.

Jane said no more, and after sitting in a brown study for a while, got up and went about her domestic affairs. Perdita, from outside, called me to come and have some fun with the goat. But the goat was perverse that day, and I, being in my bathing-dress—it was the forenoon—proposed to take the child in with me for a bath.

The sea was as smooth as a pond and the sun warm. Perdita was fearless, and could swim well. The tide was low, and we managed to get out to the wreck, where we amused ourselves with the sea anemones and shells sticking to the old timbers.

Children, brought up naturally and in freedom, not only have imagination, but live in a world of imagination more real to them than our reality. Perdita, perched on one of the cross-pieces, with her small feet dabbling in the water, and a ribbon of green seaweed twisted round her head for a crown, said: "This ship mine. By 'n' by, when I'm big, I make it all new and sail to Boston!"

"This is a much nicer place than Boston," said I.

“No!” She insisted. “Sail to Boston and get away from naughty dog.”

I hadn’t supposed that she knew anything about the dog. “There is no dog,” I said, “and dogs don’t hurt little children.”

But she looked at me, rounding her blue eyes and holding up her arms to express something vast and intimidating, and repeated, “Bi-ig dog! Make noise—so!”—she threw back her head and gave an absurd imitation of a howl—“and bite poor Pudh.”

Then her mood changed, and she burst into uproarious laughter. I caught her up in my arms and kissed her.

The weather changed that afternoon, with the abruptness peculiar to this coast; a wind began blowing from the south, the temperature rose and became sticky and uncomfortable, and the sea “got up,” as Jane expressed it.

States of the atmosphere pass into us as water through the meshes of a sieve, and storms occur in us before they break upon the world without, creating restless sensations. The cabin became oppressive, and we opened the doors and windows to let the air through. Perdita was so uneasy, after being put into her crib, that we drew the crib to the seaward door to give her the benefit of the draft.

Jane went to bed about nine o’clock as usual; but I remained sitting in the doorway, beside Perdita, who now seemed to sleep quietly. The moon, now riding high, broke through the hurrying clouds once in a while, and sent broad rays across the rough backs of the seas. The wind was not violent, except in gusts; but the heat of it was extraordinary—it seemed to come out of an oven.

I stood up at last out of patience, and going to my room, took off my skirt and waist and put on my pajamas, in which I returned to the doorway. It was some relief; but now, as I looked over to the breaking surf, an impulse came upon me to go down and take one dip in the cool waves and out again.

I didn’t pause to debate the matter, but with a glance at the child, peaceful on her little pillow, I crossed the yard quickly and out at the gate of the palisade, which I left open behind me. I would let the sea just wet me as I was, and return; by the time the wind had dried my pajamas I should be cool enough to sleep.

As I stood upon the margin, the on-driving waves loomed gigantic, and the force of them appeared so great that I wouldn't venture far in: I stepped into the sliding tongues of water, and threw myself down at full length where the depth was not above my knees. Even there the drag of the withdrawing wave was very strong. But the coolness was delicious, and I may have lain wallowing there as much as five minutes. The thunder and rush of sound filled my ears. What an incomparable creature is the sea!

I got to my feet, thoroughly revived, and turned toward the cabin.

As I did so a shrill scream, which was more like a squeal, pierced my brain like a needle. It defined itself against the surf-roar like a slender stab of light against the dark. Almost simultaneously, out through the gate of the palisade, which my neglect had left open, plunged the gray shape of the wolf, bearing in its jaws a bundle of whiteness, partly trailing on the ground. He headed down the beach in a long, swinging canter, his pace hardly impeded by the weight he carried.

My knees weakened for an instant as if from a violent blow in the breast. An instant more I wavered, prompted to pursue on foot. That folly forced back, I leaped toward the cabin for my wheel and revolver.

I rushed against something in the doorway—Jane, distracted, frantically moaning—and we stumbled together over the overturned crib. In another breath I was in my room, had snatched the revolver from the dressing-table, was out again, and on my wheel. After a fierce interval of plowing through heavy sand, I felt the firm beach under my tires, and was off.

Beneath this frenzy of physical effort, some region far within me seemed to remain cold and unflurried, calculating chances, foreseeing obstacles, measuring advantages.

Be the strength of the beast what it might—and it appeared supernatural—I knew that I should overtake it. There was supernatural vigor in my limbs, too, and my heart was firm as granite and hot as fire. I would not miss my aim this time, but I clearly perceived the danger of sending a bullet through Perdita as well as through the beast.

There was another possibility—the child might be already

dead. I must accept these risks; get her, alive or dead, and deal out vengeance.

The wind, meanwhile, had backed to the north and blew much harder, but being more behind me than in front, aided rather than hindered my speed. There was great darkness, so that I could see nothing except the relative blanching of the breakers as they foamed up to me on my left hand. The temperature fell headlong, and I felt the sting of hail on the thin wet silk of my pajamas. But I was warm, and my body exulted, in spite of the wrath in my soul.

I was steering with my left hand only on the handlebars, my right being occupied with the revolver, but my arm felt as strong as a steel bar. No sound reached me from ahead; the beast could not bark, and Perdita had not screamed after the first. How far had I ridden?—miles probably; but distance seemed nothing, and I felt that nature, to which I so loved to give myself, was on my side. Absolute evil could not prevail.

The crisis came unawares, yet found me ready.

There—almost under my wheel! The beast, with its burden, was revealed suddenly in the darkness, huddled back upon its haunches, snarling, dripping froth, at bay. Before it lay the child on the wet sand, her arms tossed up beyond her head, her cheek resting on a roll of brown seaweed, as if asleep, swathed in her torn white wrappings. Gale, sea, and sky drove upon us.

The beast seemed to tower up, huge, hideous and fatal; it hurtled at me, snarling, and I fired.

I think I laughed aloud as I saw the bullet strike its left shoulder. The coarse, gray hair was dabbled with spurting blood. I leaped from my wheel, which fell to the left, and stepped forward to complete my work.

But the beast had vanished. The gale shrieked; in the blackness the gray form of a wave surged almost to my feet—gray and writhing like the beast itself. But the wind swept the spume away, and there was nothing visible but the white, precious bundle that was Perdita. From somewhere far off, against the gale, came faintly back the long-drawn howl. It sounded to my fancy like the despairing call of a damned soul.

I lifted the child from the sand, and holding her on my left

arm, regained my seat and began to fight my way back to the cabin.

## X

Perdita was alive. Hardly a scratch marred her little body; there were only a few bruises on her head and shoulder, which, combined with the shock of fear, had made her unconscious. She had stirred and whimpered before we reached home, and Jane and I ministered to her, and before morning she slept in comfort. Marvelous beings are little children!

These things went by like the figures of a magic lantern to which one pays but dim attention. I was reliving that wild hour, and answered Jane at random. I was content; the beast had not died on the spot, but I knew it must die. The corpse could be found later.

I felt no curiosity about it. I had done my part—saved Perdita, and freed Jane from the forebodings that had haunted her. The rest would take care of itself. Nature, through my agency, had been relieved of an ulcer that had been festering in her breast, and her wholesome law had been reestablished. I felt like a soldier returned from an honorable campaign, conscious of duty done, and indifferent to what fame rumored of the battle. Enough for him that the enemy was defeated; for me that the beast was no more.

I don't deny that this has a mystical sound. Probably our lives are full of symbols which only an unacknowledged sense perceives. Spiritual events assume a material guise, in accordance with some creative principle, but do not insist on recognition. The soul is wounded, or is healed, as the case may be, and the effect, echoed upon the mortal plane, exercises in silence its benign office as penalty or reward.

The storm continued for three days; it has happened twice or thrice to me that memorable events in my life have been ushered in or accompanied by great storms. When the turmoil and darkness passed away, a new, crisp brightness began, as of approaching winter. The black bones of the wreck upon the beach had been broken up by the waves, and lay scattered for miles along the shore. Jane congratulated herself on the supply of firewood, but Perdita was displeased; how was she to get to Boston?

That problem has since been solved in a less magical manner than her fancy had provided. I kept alive the link between myself and these two. Jane died after a few years; Perdita, after adventures not to be told here, is a fortunate and happy woman.

But why do I dilly-dally and gossip and procrastinate? I must tell the end of this story, great as is my unwillingness to do it. It is inhuman and incredible, but the truth has no concern with such adjectives. And you may give it lodging according to the character of your philosophy; you have your choice and opportunity.

But perhaps you know the end already. I thought, afterward, that I had known it. No secrets are better hidden than are those that we hide from ourselves.

I got back to Boston about the middle of November of that year, and was enjoying, I must admit, the various luxuries abounding in that most respectable old house of mine, which I had so well dispensed with, and with such a glow of fresh life, in the primitive cabin on Thirteen-Mile Beach. My friends in society had also returned from their holidays, and we were practising upon one another our old, urbane amenities.

One of the first to call on me was, of course, Topham Brent. I flirted artistically with him, as it is my fate to do with some men. He told me I looked tremendously fit, and wanted to know what adventures I had had. I answered "None," and inquired whether he had heard anything of the Rev. Nathaniel Tyler. "That man interested me," I remarked.

"Not really?—never should have imagined it!" was his ironic rejoinder. "Why, seems to me I heard somewhere that he was back from the Orient, or some such place. They said he was in bad health, too—worse than when we had the benefit of his company on the Pleasances' house-boat two years ago. But he hasn't called me in, so I'm unable to present any pathological details."

"I must drop him a line; I'd like to see him," said I.

But the next day I received a note from him. He wrote:

I've dwelt in the desert since we met, and while there sustained an injury which confines me to my house. I can never expect to appear in a

pulpit again. It would afford me great pleasure if you would come to see me. I have never forgotten our talks on the house-boat, and I have reached some conclusions on the subjects we discussed which I would like to submit to you.

I was promised an invitation to a lunch next day, Tuesday, and to a reception the same evening. On Wednesday I had tickets for an afternoon concert, and a dinner later. On Thursday I was particularly desired to attend the meeting of the Homogeneity Club, and on Friday— No matter what; I made up my mind to give my Friday to the afflicted clergyman.

I found him in his study, which apparently adjoined his bedroom; a soothing brown effect of furniture and decoration, steel engravings of sacred subjects on the walls, shelves of books, old quartos, volumes of recent philosophical and scientific essays; on the table a portfolio of designs of "The Dance of Death," and several French and Russian novels; on the mantel-piece a bronze replica of the Venus Kallipygos, of Naples.

These things reported themselves to the corners of my eyes, the direct look of which, of course, was fixed upon Tyler. He reclined in an invalid's chair, fronting an open coal grate fire; his attitude reminded me of how he and I used to recline side by side in our deck chairs on the house-boat.

Otherwise he was strangely altered. His hair was gray and thin, and hung down to his neck. A thin gray beard was on his cheeks and chin and upper lip. His former spareness had become mere boniness; the sutures of his head, his cheek-bones, the angles of the jaw might have been a skull's, and his body, as indicated beneath the wrappings over him, was but a skeleton.

His eyes, sunken deep under the tufted eyebrows, appeared almost black in the subdued light of the room; they seemed to draw inward toward the narrow dividing ridge of his high nose, giving his gaze an intense concentration. His long hands rested on the arms of his chair; they were like talons, with prominent knuckles, and narrow, polished nails of a purplish hue. But his mouth had still its sharp, voluptuous curves, and smiled as he greeted me, though the eyes had no part in the smile. There was a sort of bunch over his left shoulder which the drapery didn't wholly conceal.

I said to myself, "The man will be dead in a few days." I felt this, quite as much as I inferred it from his aspect.

But the tones of his voice were firm and cheerful, with even a half-laughing accent of raillery in them.

"If you were a disciple of mine, Miss Klemm, summoned here for ghostly counsel, you'd need no better symbol of *memento mori* than myself, I fancy. But it is I who am under obligation to you—for this and other favors. I won't keep you long. I'm mortified at not being able to get up and fetch you a chair; will you pardon me, and be seated?"

As I sat down beside him he made a movement of the head, upon which the young woman in the attire of a professional nurse, who had been standing near his chair, silently withdrew into the bedroom and softly closed the door.

"As you've surmised," he then said, "I shall shortly lay aside this muddy vesture of decay; but I thought, in deference to your feelings and many social engagements that it would be more considerate to arrange our interview before than after that event; it was bound to take place one way or the other. You—er—enjoyed yourself last summer?"

"I'm feeling the better for it," I replied.

"You have the goddesslike quality of sweeping obstacles from your path, and punishing interlopers," he rejoined; and as he spoke that satanic presence sparkled in the depths of his eyes. "When Diana, your prototype, was surprised at her bath by Actæon, she didn't suffer him to live to boast of his enjoyment of her perfections. But I dare say he was as willing as I am to pay that price for the privilege."

"I hear you've been abroad," said I, not ready to understand him.

"Oh, that is for the vulgar ear. You and I are augurs, and have no subterfuges. Perhaps, in good old Cotton Mather's day, we may have bestridden a broomstick together. I've always had a notion that our acquaintance is of long standing."

I kept silence, instinctively shutting my mind.

"Abroad, yes: far abroad!—and in the desert, to which the Sahara or the plain of Nineveh would be populous." He pointed to his own breast with a light laugh. "There, like our friend Walt Whitman, I invited my soul, and we had it out *à outrance*—thanks to my friend, Miss Martha Klemm."

"What do you expect me to say, Mr Tyler?"

"My dear young lady, you are voluble! From the moment of

your entrance—if not before—you and I have been conversing like babbling brooks, though even had my clinical attendant not so discreetly retired, she couldn't have heard a syllable of it. The footprints perplexed you, possibly; but that first moonlight tryst, which ended so explosively—surely you've had no doubts since then?"

The sensation was as if he were throwing invisible nets around me. I stood up, with angry eyes. "Shall I call the nurse?"

"Ah, have a little patience! Give a poor moribund wretch the consolation of shriving himself. Don't let me perish quite alone in the world—alone—with the beast!"

At that word, and at that thought, I sat down again. I put out all my self-command to keep from trembling. He nodded thankfully, but for some moments, contending against the exhaustion which his assumption of mockery had, as I now perceived, cost him, he could not speak. When he did, it was in another vein.

"It needed a man like me—if I am a man—to conceive it and to do it. Learning, culture, the religious training and atmosphere, personal sanctity, esthetic sensitiveness, a heredity without blemish—I abounded in all that. I was vowed to God. To descend deep, you must first go high—touch the halo before polluting it. I can say that I went deep, at least. None has been lower. Yes, I went into the desert—but not to pray. It was a wonderful journey! Not for the elixir of life, not for gold, not for holiness. And, oh, if I could have gone with your hand in mine! It might have been, Martha, that if we'd gone on the quest together, we might not only have found what we sought, but have returned alive!"

"Am I a part of your confession, Mr Tyler?" I said with a coldness which was partly designed to chill him back to earth from this feverish flight.

"Ah, well, I ask your pardon!" he returned, his smile ghastly. "I shouldn't have ventured on the liberty if I hadn't thought my condition might excuse it. Really, though, as a rank outsider, which I certainly am now, I may say that you are the only woman with whom I ever desired an intimate connection. Possibly I led you to suspect as much on the boat; and I will add that I was withheld from proposing (as they say) by the very

strength of the sentiment; that is, the risk of the enterprise I had undertaken. Had you happened to accept me, you see, and braved the desert with me, we might, so far from getting back alive, have shared in the disaster—made it even worse, if possible!”

“Put what you have to say in plain words,” I said, not trusting myself to a longer speech.

“Thank you! Yes, it’s the pulpiteer’s vice—phrases, circumlocutions! Thank you! The quest of the absolute evil—that’s a phrase, too.” He set his teeth, and partly rose on his right elbow. “I went to find the devil, and I found him! He’s all they say of him and more. I looked down—down; I thought away everything human, sacred, innocent, pure; I desecrated and profaned the Holy of Holies, burned every bridge, worshiped the black he-goat with the flame between his horns—ha, ha, ha!—and at last the beast was there! Squatting there in the little shack in the marsh, I felt the transformation—oh, the agony and triumph of it! The big, grizzled, shaggy body—the crooked thighs and sharp, pointed hocks behind—the clawed forepaws, the long, slavering grin, thick ears, and those eyes—those eyes! You recognized them, my dear Miss Klemm—yes, you did! And the odor—pah!”

“Stop!” I whispered. But he had gone too far.

“Then out I galloped into the moonlight, and howled—how I howled! You heard me; not quite the popular preacher’s voice, but you recognized it! Fancy the Rev. Nathaniel Tyler cantering down the aisle of his church, and addressing his congregation with a howl—‘Ha, ha, hoo!’”

I leaned forward and put my hand resolutely on his, bending my will to check his hysteria. He panted, gurgled in his throat, and presently expressed his gratitude in a look once more human. I didn’t like to think what might have come to pass in another moment! Indeed, the next thing he said, speaking now very faintly, with closed eyes, “There was no telling when—where—!” confirmed my misgiving.

The flicker of life almost failed in him, but he feebly resisted my attempt to remove my hand. “You know,” he said, with trembling eyelids, “persons fed on poisons are poisoned by the antidote. Your touch would have saved me at first—now it

brings a delicious death! It finishes what your bullet began. I'm glad to die a—man!" The words were low, but distinct.

At last he lifted himself and gathered energy. "The—child—lived?"

"She was not hurt."

He relaxed, a convulsion that I couldn't interpret passed over his face. But I knew this was the end, and called sharply to the nurse. His grip on my hand had not loosened.

The nurse bent over him, and turned back the wrap on his left shoulder, and then loosened the bandage beneath. A puncture, not large, but with inflamed edges, was revealed; my bullet must have passed just above the heart.

"An odd case," said the woman. "He'd been away on a trip for several weeks, and came back wounded; wouldn't have a doctor, and acted strange about it. When he got weak, they had a surgeon in to examine him. Not a mortal wound at all, but his neglect of it, or something, gave it a bad turn; likely his vitality was low, too."

After death his lips gradually drew back in a sort of grimace, disclosing both the upper and lower teeth, which were remarkably perfect and white. Efforts to correct the contraction of the facial muscles were futile. It gave the narrow, lean face a sort of wolfish look.

Sometimes, even after so many years, I feel the grip of his fingers on my arm.